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CORE CONCEPTS FOR TALKING TO STUDENTS

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You are members of a generation which inherits a diminished earth; degraded air and water and soil and sunshine. Wind, water, earth and fire, the basic supports for life, are all badly damaged. If you carry on with the life style and the philosophy of your parents and grandparents your children will inherit an uninhabitable earth. You must live lives radically different from the lives they lived. Your principal problem is to defend the earth from further damage and to inaugurate the great healing of the earth that is so essential. For the earth is now in a state of extreme distress from which it is doubtful that complete recovery can be made. But if recovery is possible the contribution of your generation is critical to it. You must form a new understanding of how the human species relates to the rest of creation.

The proof that we, your parents, have wrongfully perceived the meaning of our presence in the world is in the fact that our lives are considerably without meaning and that the earth is being turned into a wasteland. If nothing else convinces you of this, look at our behavior. The majority, while we are not involved in the drug culture or in crime, are committed to consumerism, the supreme pathology of our time; the pathology that is wrecking the earth.

What we aimed at in the past few hundred years we were successful at achieving and now we find that principal parts of that achievement and the basic goals were based on exploitation; exploitation of native peoples and minority races, exploitation of women, and above all, exploitation of the natural world. The Europeans came to the new world with plunder on their minds and that has never changed. Plunder is still a ruling motivation in our culture, which, combined with a shortsighted disregard for those who succeed us, results in what we see today, a society with little meaning and without meaningful goals. We treasure freedom of the individual and individual goals are possible, thus we have a small population of noble persons who spend their lives in the search for knowledge, the pursuit of justice and the relief of suffering; otherwise wealth and power, if not just survival, are the goals for individuals. But noble community goals are nearly non-existent and nobody has ever heard of species goals. No wonder youth is soured, alienated, and has turned to empty-headed consumerism, thrill seeking, sports and drugs. We thought that science and technology would bring on an earthly paradise and now that science and technology have done their best we are flooded with labor saving appliances, and amusements and trash piles so huge we are going to drown in them, and we are immersed in a deep sense of malaise. We have fifty thousand nuclear bombs. Just a few will bring on nuclear winter but greedy and power-mad people can persuade us that we need more. And we can sit and be entertained continually, while our minds atrophy and turn rancid.

The culture is brainsick as well as soulsick. The culture made it OK to destroy the source of life, to lay waste that which the human can not do without. A culture which allows its topsoil to be washed away and blown away and paved over can only be called sick. Thomas Berr says the culture is autistic

which is certainly true, but I say it is brainsick, that its thinking apparatus is diseased.

The noble people in the society today are those who work for justice for the oppressed and relief for those who suffer. But who is thinking of what the rescued ought to aim their lives toward. After you are made whole, then what?; after you are saved, then what? Do you join the meaningless yuppies in suburbia leading empty suburban lives? Those are the questions that Thomas asks and the answer our society gives is a blank stare. The truth is that you are not being urged toward more meaningful goals by the teaching establishment, by your parents or by the culture, beyond the sub-goals of social justice and a good conscience. If you want to spend your life in service to a higher good nobody has any guidance to give you.

Almost nobody, that is. There is Thomas. It is Thomas and a group of those who understand him who now strive to define the goals of the reinvented human: species goals, goals derived from pondering on the meaning of the human species as members of the earth community and having responsibilities pertinent to the success of the earth and the earth community.

Heretofore the culture has never defined for itself, or even thought about, programs for contributing to the success of the life system of planet earth. Heretofore there has never even been awareness of such a responsibility. Heretofore the culture has been autistic, unable to include any but the human in its pursuit of well-being. As a result, when you graduate and set out to make your way through life there will be very little prospect for getting work which will be fulfilling as well as rewarding. That must be changed.

The changes that are necessary are as earth shaking as the changes that have characterized any great shift in perceptions. One could liken the change to that which began when the fifteenth and sixteenth century philosophers reinterpreted the meaning of the earth and inspired the birth and flourishing of the mechanical age and industrialism. But unlike that entry into a new age this one cannot be done gradually. The earth is in such extremity that its rescue has to begin immediately on a broad front.

"Well now", you say to me, "how do I go about it?" And I answer that the outlines of how to go about it are emerging, but they are very faint. In the future, decisions must be made in the understanding that the well-being of the natural world takes on a co-equal status with the well-being of the human.

The economic system is particularly critical. Current economics is based on growth and maximum production and consumption. The earth cannot endure that approach. We must take up an economics based on conservation of the natural wealth, the capital of the biosphere, and on minimum production and consumption. It is certain, I believe, that there is enough, and more, of what is needed for human well-being and earth well-being as well. What we do not have

is a system for seeing to it that every creature has access to what is needed. Also there is surely enough brainpower to invent an adequate distribution system. If the economic problem can be solved, the rest can be also.

Your future is to be found in working toward a situation where the human species is devoted not only to its own welfare but to the welfare and the success of the whole life community. This is not a matter for dismay but for joy and celebration.

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